

**Testimony of Jeffrey Krilla,
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
before
The House International Relations
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights
and International Operations
at a hearing entitled
“The Endangered Children of Northern Uganda”
April 26, 2006**

Chairman Smith, Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for holding this timely hearing on the endangered children of northern Uganda. Chairman Smith, you recently returned from a trip to Uganda, and Mr. Royce and Mr. Payne and many Members of the Subcommittee have also traveled to the region and know these issues first-hand. Clearly, you do not make a trip to a country where the lives of children are so heavily impacted and return home the same. For that matter, you can not listen to the moving NGO testimony on northern Uganda or see a movie like *Invisible Children* and remain the same. We held a screening of the film *Invisible Children* in my bureau recently and I understand that there may have been screenings of this film on Capitol Hill. For those Members of the Subcommittee who have not seen *Invisible Children*, I commend this film to your attention. This film is educating many people around the world about the conflict and its lasting effects on the children. This issue has understandably struck a chord with the American people. I understand that on the night of April 29th, groups of Americans plan to gather in 136 cities across the country for what is being called the Global Night Commute. This is a profound act of solidarity on behalf of the children of northern Uganda.

I am new to the State Department and this is my first official appearance before this Committee as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. However, I have had a long-standing interest in Africa and care deeply about the African people. Prior to joining the Department, I served for five years as Regional Director for Africa for the International Republic Institute (IRI) where I coordinated election observation missions, political party development programs and civil society programs in Africa. My work in Africa extends back even

further to my time as a high school teacher in the segregated Lebowa region of South Africa during the last years of Apartheid rule. My experiences in Lebowa, where I witnessed firsthand the potential, resiliency and eventual triumph of the South African people in the face of brutal oppression, continue to influence my work with the people of Africa today.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, the people of northern Uganda continue to suffer under a 20-year reign of terror imposed by Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Without question, those who suffer the most from the LRA's perverse tactics are the children.

In the 2005 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* for Uganda, we reported on the LRA's sexual exploitation of children, the use of child soldiers, the plight of the "night commuter" children who travel long distances from their homes in search of protection from the LRA, and the overall deplorable conditions of the IDP camps, in which over 80% of the approximately 1.5 million occupants are women and children.

I have recently met with the new Ugandan Ambassador to the United States, Perezi Kamunanwire, and the new U.S. Ambassador to Uganda, Steven Browning, to discuss these issues. I look forward to close cooperation with them as we work to improve the security and living conditions for the people of northern Uganda.

In February, a member of my staff traveled to Gulu to monitor a DRL-funded project that focuses on building a coalition of civil society organizations in the north to lobby the local and national government more effectively for their myriad needs.

As you may know, Uganda is one of three countries in which the UN system has agreed to pilot a new approach to ensuring both more predictable and more robust protection and assistance for internally displaced persons. That will bring in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in a protection role and hence our Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration. PRM Assistant Secretary of State, Ellen Sauerbrey, also recently traveled to Kenya and Uganda to study refugee conditions and the nexus with IDP issues. USAID, PRM, and we are all coordinating our efforts.

This summer, I and members of my staff plan to travel to the region for meetings that will address the regional dimensions of the LRA threat as

well as what more the international community can do to improve the situation in northern Uganda.

The living conditions in northern Uganda are stark and deserve international attention. Uganda has the 3rd largest IDP population in the world. Approximately 200 camps house 1.5 million or more IDPs. Estimates indicate that approximately 1.2 million of these IDPs are in the Acholi districts of Kitgum, Gulu, and Pader. The IDP camps are heavily congested, and some house an excess of 60,000 people. Resources have proven insufficient to provide adequate security, water, sanitation facilities, or health care services to the people who live there. Consequently, the IDP camps have high mortality rates (1.54 per 10,000 per day); roughly three times the national average (based on January to July 2005 estimates of 35,000 deaths in Kitgum, Gulu, and Pader). Civilians' freedom of movement outside of camps is extremely limited by the LRA threat as well as Ugandan government policies.

The 2005 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* for Uganda stated approximately 38,000 children have been abducted by the LRA during the past 20 years and forced into roles as soldiers, laborers, and sex slaves. An estimated 85 percent of LRA captives are children and most are between the ages of 11 to 16. These children are forced to fight as rebels and participate in the killing of civilians, including other children. We know that children suffer higher casualties in battle than adults, and often emerge from conflicts with greater physical and psychological challenges. In September 2005, the International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted Kony and several of his commanders on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including enslavement and sexual enslavement, enlisting children into armed forces, and cruel treatment of civilians. The U.S. government has also designated the LRA as a terrorist organization.

Last year, Rory Anderson of World Vision reported having met an 11-year-old boy in the Gulu World Vision Children of War Center who was forced to bite to death and swallow the blood of a fellow child who had attempted to escape from the LRA. He was forced to perform this heinous act as a warning, so that he himself would not attempt to escape. I am a father, and this is a deeply disturbing story. And yet, this is just one of thousands of deeply disturbing stories that reflect the lives of the endangered children of northern Uganda.

Due to the threat of LRA abduction, at one time as many as 35,000 child "night commuters" traveled from conflict areas or IDP camps to spend the night in shelters, schools, churches or balconies in urban centers with greater capacity to protect them. Recent assessments, including one by the State Department, reveal that due to a decrease in LRA attacks the number of night commuter children has declined dramatically in the past six months to 19,000 or fewer. For even one child to be subjected to nightly separation from his or her community, and forced to commute long distances under the threat of violence, abduction or sexual assault, is one too many.

The U.S. places a high priority on assisting child victims of conflict throughout the world. In northern Uganda, it is clear that the key to assisting child soldiers and child victims is to continue to focus our diplomatic and programmatic assistance on three key areas: humanitarian assistance, military assistance to help defeat the LRA and build the capacity and professionalism of the UPDF, and political pressure to urge the Government of Uganda to reach out to the Acholi people and support reconciliation efforts.

The U.S. is a leading source of humanitarian and other aid for the people of northern Uganda and we provided \$78 million in bi-lateral assistance in fiscal year 2005. The U.S. was the source of more than 50% of the total World Food Program assistance in Uganda in 2005. The U.S. also funds critical programs that address the deep psychological wounds of former child soldiers and child abductees, by providing these children with psycho-social counseling, medical care, vocational training, and opportunities to reintegrate themselves into the local community. The U.S. has funded child reception centers for children rescued from LRA captivity. U.S. assistance has also supported several overnight shelters where children stay to be protected from LRA abduction. My USAID colleague, Leonard Rogers, is here to discuss our assistance programs in greater depth.

We have provided the UPDF with more than \$5 million in non-lethal military assistance to combat the LRA, including communication equipment and trucks. We also provide training for the UPDF in the areas of human rights, civil/military relations, military justice and professional military education.

We continue to urge the Ugandan government to reach out to the Acholi people through dialogue to support the reconciliation process. The U.S. continues to support efforts to promote a dialogue of peace and reconciliation among civilians in northern Uganda. In addition, the Northern Uganda Peace Initiative (NUPI) is an American initiative that addresses a peaceful solution to the ongoing civil conflict in the region and seeks to engage the Government of Uganda and the LRA in talks, with the goal of achieving peace and support for national reconciliation.

We also urge the Ugandan government to coordinate with the neighboring governments of Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to end the spread of LRA terror into these countries.

One of northern Uganda's most pressing needs is increased and adequate security and protection for civilians living in IDP camps and surrounding areas, as well as protection for the brave local and international humanitarian workers who risk their lives to provide basic needs. Both the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) and the Local Defense Units (LDUs) -- which are local militia units composed of volunteers -- are assigned to protect IDP camps. The protection regrettably is inadequate.

The U.S. continues to urge the Government of Uganda to provide effective protection for civilians by adequately deploying UPDF troops in the region, particularly to enhance the protection of IDP camps against LRA attacks. In addition, the U.S. strongly urges the Government of Uganda to investigate and prosecute all violence against civilians by security forces, and focus efforts on providing human rights training along with security training to deployed personnel in the region.

The U.S. government and international community pay close attention to human rights abuses committed by the UPDF and LDUs. We have documented those abuses, including rape of women and girls, by UPDF and LDU security forces acting with impunity in the 2005 annual human rights report. As I stated earlier, the U.S. provides funding to train UPDF in the areas of civil/military relations, military justice and human rights in an effort to curb these human rights abuses.

In 2002, the Ugandan government ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Children, which the State Department worked hard to negotiate. The protocol prescribes minimum ages for military

recruitment and participation in conflict. Ugandan law prohibits service in the military by persons under 18 years of age. In October 2005, the UNICEF-Uganda Representative, Martin Nogwanja, stated that the UPDF regular force has no child soldiers. Though the UPDF appears to be making a concentrated effort to comply with the protocol, the LDUs continue to have high child recruitments, reportedly due to the collusion of local officials, and lack of doctors present to assess the age of LDU recruits.

Another area of concern is the NGO Registration Amendment Bill that was approved recently by the Ugandan Parliament. The Ugandan Parliament's passage of the NGO Bill is troubling and sends the wrong message to the international community about the country's commitment to address the problems in the north. It requires NGOs and evangelical churches to renew their registration permits annually. A controversial clause allows representatives of the Ugandan Internal and External Security Forces to be members on the NGO board, and the Bill gives the NGO Board powers to register or deny registry to NGOs opposed to government policy. Uganda enjoys a vibrant civil society that serves as a mechanism for checks and balances on the government. We will continue to press the government to allow wide latitude in its implementation so that the important work of NGOs in the region is not unduly hampered.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding this hearing on the deeply troubling situation of the children in northern Uganda. Thank you for the invitation to testify. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor wants to work with this Subcommittee in the weeks and months ahead to help the children in northern Uganda. We are working with partner organizations such as the International Committee for the Red Cross, Save the Children, World Vision and the International Rescue Committee to provide vital humanitarian assistance. In northern and western Uganda, we work with over 70 local and national NGOs to provide counseling, provide conflict resolution, and encourage economic development in areas affected by conflict.

Through our partnerships with NGOs and their humanitarian assistance, through continued dialogue with the Ugandan government and other governments in the region, and through continued non-lethal military assistance and training, the U.S. government will continue to develop and implement policies and programs focused on resolving the humanitarian and

human rights crises facing children and the general population of the region, and of course work on strategies to resolve peacefully the LRA conflict itself.